DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 238 405 IR 010 927

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TITLE Community Cable for and by Children: An ACT Handbook.
INSTITUTION Action for Children's Television, Newtonville, MA.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 25p.; Photographs will not reproduce.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Cable Television; Children; *Childrens Television; *Community Involvement; *Community Programs; Production Techniques; Program Descriptions; Program Development; Program Implementation; *Programing (Broadcast)
IDENTIFIERS Franchising; *Local Origination

ABSTRACT

Describing community cable as television's best chance at zeroing in on the needs and interests of a specific local audience, as well as a fertile environment for breeding a new variety of children's television, this handbook discusses the potential of and issues and factors involved in local programming. Topics addressed are why community cable is important; ways of setting up community cable services, e.g., local, educational, government, religious, and leased access, and local origination; negotiating with a cable system for community use channel space; kinds of children's programming that can be fostered by commmunity cable, i.e., shows for, by, and about young people; how to get involved; what's in it for young people; serving special audiences; what's in it for the cable company; building community support; and avoiding the pitfalls. Quotations from individuals involved in community programming highlight each topic, and local programs currently produced in a number of communities are briefly described. Ways in which local citizens can promote community cable are suggested for three major groups: parents, teachers, and community leaders; the cable company; and local businesses and organizations. (LMM)

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Community Cable for and by Children An ACT Handbook

ACTION FOR CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

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Action for Children's Television

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Cover photo: "Kids Alive!," Bloomington, Indiana
Horizon Communications Corporation

Action for Children's Television (ACT) is a national nonprofit child advocacy group working to encourage diversity in children's television and to eliminate commercial abuses targeted to children. ACT facilitates legal reform and promotes public awareness of issues relating to children's television through public education campaigns, publications, national conferences, and speaking engagements. Founded in 1968, ACT has more than 20,000 members across the country and the support of major organizations concerned with children.

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Community Cable for and by Children An ACT Handbook

It's the Girl Scouts, the Y, and the Mental Health Association. It's America—red, white, and blue and apple pie. It's just ordinary people of all kinds and colors expressing their different points of view.
—Sue Miller Buske, executive director, National Federation of Local Cable Programmers

It's like those Mickey Rooney movies where Mickey says, "Hey, kids, let's make a show."
—Karen Kalergis, community programming director, Hawkeye CableVision, Iowa City

It's not meant to be slick like Hollywood, but it's not meant to be hokey, either.
—Roxie Cole, executive director of access, Viacom, Dayton, Ohio

Community cable: it's an electronic soapbox; it's programming without the glitz and glitter of commercial broadcasting; it's homemade, hometown TV. It's all that, and more . . . programs like "Teen's Express" in Worcester, Massachusetts, or Horseheads, New York's "Library Kaleidoscope," or Pompton, New Jersey's "Pulse of Pompton."

Whether it's programming produced by interested citizens taking advantage of cable access facilities or local origination programming produced by the cable company, community cable is television's best chance at zeroing in on the needs and interests of a particular town or city. It's programming geared not to the masses, but to a specific local audience.

For young people, community cable is an opportunity for service that is disappearing from commercial broadcasting. At a time when the commercial TV networks fail to provide one daily or even weekly children's show Monday through Friday, local cable channels can supply a fertile environment for breeding a new variety of children's television.

Action for Children's Television (ACT) has kept a watchful eye on the potential of cable since the days when cable was little more than a means of bringing TV signals to geographic locations not easily reached by traditional broadcast technology. In 1971 ACT testified at Federal Communications Commission cable hearings, the first of many appearances before government agencies determining regulation of the burgeoning cable industry. Ten years later, ACT hosted a national symposium, ACT on Cable and Children, at which cable franchising, programming, and economics were discussed. *Cable and Children: An ACT Handbook* appeared in 1981, encouraging communities to get involved in franchise negotiations to ensure that cable systems serve audience needs.

Community cable by and for young people can be stimulating, entertaining, enlightening, challenging; ACT knows, because it has recognized a number of such efforts with its annual Achievement in Children's Television Awards. But those who make community cable for and with children do so for more than the acclaim. They do it because they share a commitment to local cable TV, and to children. ACT applauds that commitment; the goal of this handbook is to make such dedication to community cable become even more widespread.

ACT is grateful for the support of Digital Equipment Corporation, the Foundation for Character Education, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in making *Community Cable for and by Children* possible.

"Barre Ethnic Heritage Festival," Barre, Vermont
Vermont Television Corporation

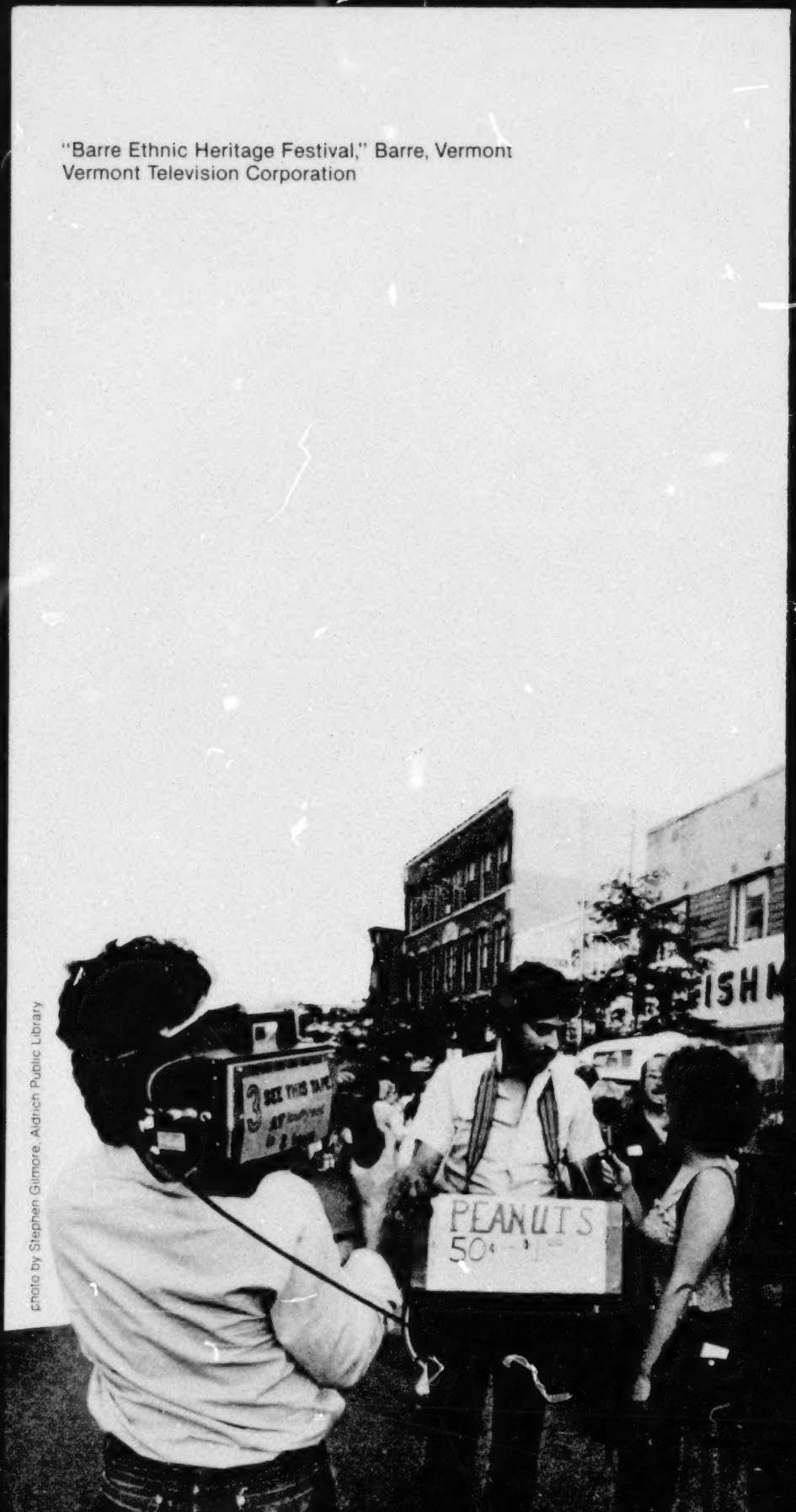


photo by Stephen Gilmore, Aldrich Public Library

Why Community Cable Is Important

The magnitude of television viewing and the impact of that viewing on children are great. And yet one need only scan a TV schedule to confirm that the choice of programs designed for the child audience on commercial television is limited, to put it charitably. . . . Broadcasters quite simply have breached their social compact with their constituency—the viewing audience—to enrich, entertain, and educate.
—Henry Rivera, commissioner, Federal Communications Commission

Commercial broadcasters' commitment to programming for children and teens is dwindling. Public broadcasting—one television service that really cares about young people—is treading water to stay afloat in tough financial times. Even if its financial future were guaranteed, PBS is not exclusively a children's TV network; its mandate is to serve all ages.

So the coming of cable is good news to young television viewers. But cable for young people means more than national children's channels and box office hits on the small screen, exciting as those options can be. It also means a chance for television to better serve local youth, and for local communities, including children and teens, to actually make TV.

Unlike broadcast television, which is transmitted through the airwaves, cable TV signals are delivered to homes through underground lines or lines attached to telephone poles. Cable companies must negotiate with local governments for the rights to lay cable to serve subscribers within the community. Winning those rights brings with it a responsibility to cater to the programming needs of the community. Any cable operator who ignores that responsibility may well be out of the running when the time comes to renegotiate the cable franchise.

Nationally, 39.3 percent of all homes with televisions subscribed to cable as of July 1983. In many of the earliest cabled towns and cities, little was offered in the way of local programming. As public awareness of cable's potential has grown, however, more and more communities have pushed for increased local programming—including children's programming—produced either by the cable company or by groups and individuals within the community.

We're taking TV and putting it firmly in the hands of children.
—M. Manoog Kaprielian, program services manager, Cox Cable, Cranston, Rhode Island

Despite the fact that the airwaves belong to the public, broadcast television has never given the public much access to the airwaves. The Communications Act of 1934 mandates broadcast licensees to operate "in the public interest, convenience, and necessity." Yet aside from a chance to speak out in guest editorials sandwiched between midday news reports and commercials for laundry detergents, citizens have had few opportunities—and young people fewest of all—to reach the eyes and ears of their neighbors through the TV screen.

And then came cable. In East Lansing, Michigan, black students got together to explore the community and learn cable production techniques. The result: the student-produced "Black Notes." In Grapevine, Texas, local cable allows any boy or girl who can sing, dance, or play the piano to become a star on "Showbiz for Kidz." Shows like these are what community cable is all about: teenagers and children becoming active participants in the medium of television, and giving the audience a kidseye perspective on the world.

"The 8:40 Report," Hackensack, New Jersey
UA-Columbia Cablevision of New Jersey

Spelling Out the Terms

For parents, educators, librarians, and children, cable television offers an incredible range of service if local communities are able to organize to require, establish, and support them.
—Don R. Smith, cable communications coordinator, Austin, Texas

There are as many ways of setting up community cable services as there are cable systems offering local coverage. Generally, a town or city issues a request for proposals, describing the kind of services it wants. Cable systems then bid for the franchise, and the system with the most attractive service package wins. Some communities, however, are taking a different route and setting up municipally-owned cable systems in lieu of signing up with a private system.

The best way to ensure community cable programming by and for young people is to require it in the contract, and then to appoint a citizen advisory board to monitor compliance. Before awarding a cable franchise, the town or city (or in some cases, state) should make clear its particular demands. If no one speaks out for adequate channel space where children can produce their own cable programming, the cable system is unlikely to make special provisions to serve young people. But when a community believes in citizen access to the TV screen and acts on that belief, youth participation in cable can be ensured. In Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, citizen action resulted in an entire local cable channel for children, mandated by city ordinance—the first of its kind in the country.

Every cable franchise should outline precisely what forms of community cable will be offered and how they will serve young people. Any of the following options may be included. An agreement that truly serves the community will include them all and will guarantee that community programming is included in the basic subscription rate:

- Public access—This is programming initiated and created by members of the community; the cable company should not interfere in the content of the shows. Public access programming is noncommercial.
- Educational access—Schools, colleges, and libraries can produce their own cable programs; students are usually involved in the production.
- Government access—Local officials can use access to increase citizen awareness by cablecasting town meetings and important public messages.
- Religious access—Synagogues and churches can publicize activities and spread their views by producing access programs.
- Leased access—A kind of rent-a-channel, leased access gives companies or individuals a voice on cable TV. Program content is controlled by those who pay for channel time to get their message out.
- Local origination (LO)—LO programs are produced by the cable company, which controls the content; young people may or may not be involved in production. LO programming can carry advertising.

"The Return of the Astrekynd," Willow Grove, Pennsylvania
Cinekyd Enterprises, Inc.

photo by Jill Degenhardt

Up Against the Industry

The leaders of the industry don't look on access with favor. They don't see it as a proper thing for cities to be doing—they see it as a give-away.
—Randy Van Dalsen, director of membership services and finance, National Federation of Local Cable Programmers

A handful of cable operators are enthusiastic supporters of community involvement in programming and production. But many cable operators find it a nuisance to have to put aside for community use channel space that could be dedicated to more lucrative programming—pay-TV services, for example.

Out of 4,637 cable systems operating in the United States in June 1981, only 485 offered public access, while 497 offered educational access. Many more—3,045 systems—scheduled some kind of local origination programming, but this ran the gamut from local weather channels to employment bulletins. Innovative, entertaining local cablecasts geared to children and adolescents were (and are) few and far between.

Luckily for cable subscribers, winning a franchise is a competitive business, so no community has to settle for a system that won't deliver diverse local programming for all ages. Cable *can* benefit the community; there's no excuse for a system not to do so. But it's up to citizens to make good cable happen by speaking out for children . . . and then holding the cable company to its promises.

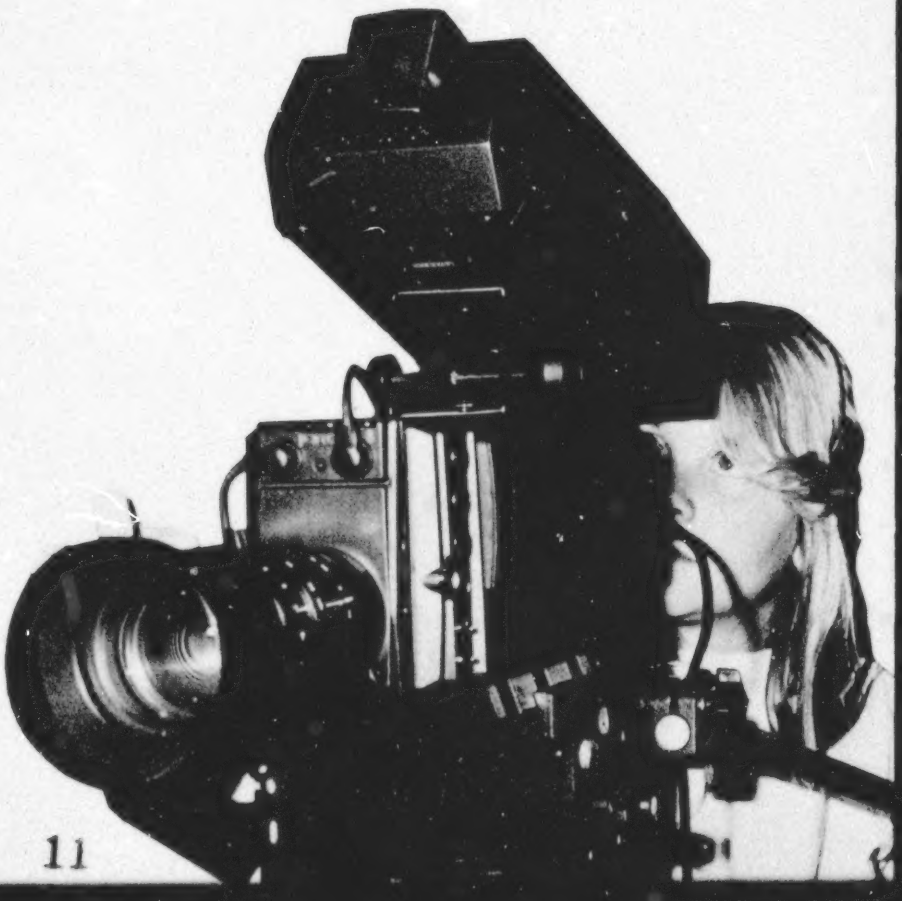
The cable industry is no different from all others in our economy: the "bottom line" determines policy. . . . When the hard times come and the budget trimmers show up from headquarters, any "good will" contribution to local access that isn't a legal requirement is almost bound to be the first cost cut.
—Professor George C. Stoney, New York University

Community cable for and by young people cannot rely on a "gentleman's agreement" between a town and a cable system. The franchise contract must spell out not only what forms of local programming the system will provide but how that programming will be encouraged and financed. Again, it's up to the community to determine how many access channels it needs, and how they will be supported.

Some franchises call for the cable operator to provide technical training, equipment, and/or facilities. Others create an independent access center, headed by an access facilitator or coordinator and operated by a nonprofit foundation, by a local institution, or by the municipality itself. Yet another alternative is for a number of nearby communities to organize and run a joint access center.

At the franchise table, cable operators sometimes come on strong with promises of local origination programming, hoping perhaps to steer community interest toward an area where the cable company maintains control over what is produced. But it is only through cable access, where the public is in command, that a community can freely exercise its First Amendment rights; nowhere else can television be so diverse, so controversial . . . so democratic. The alert community looks for a commitment to local origination on the part of the cable company—but in addition to, not instead of, public access programming.

"Cable Television Workshop," Midland Park, New Jersey
UA-Columbia Cablevision of New Jersey



Changing the Face of Children's TV

Oral histories, softball games, day care services, dance, tortilla making, generation gaps . . . the list of public access programs is endless. There is no problem in operating and filling a local "community television" channel; the major problem is finding cable TV companies sensitive to communities and their human needs.

—Brian Owens, vice-president of programming, Cable America, Inc., Encino, California

Children's book publishers understand that young people are a diverse group: picture books are different from teenage novels. Commercial broadcast TV too often fails to take into account the variety of interests and abilities that make up the "two- to 11-year-old market" of television viewers. Community cable is the perfect vehicle for correcting that failure, through "narrowcasting"—that is, programming geared to specific audiences, to the few rather than the many. Every cable franchise should ensure that enough channel space is set aside to allow for age-specific cable programming serving a variety of interests.

Community cable is a chance to focus on three kinds of children's television largely neglected by broadcast TV:

- Shows *for* young people—Children are among both the home audience and the contestants in "Triviosity," a call-in game show carried on the Nantucket, Massachusetts, cable system. Area merchants offer prizes for which callers compete by answering questions about current events, politics, and personalities.
- Shows *by* young people—Newton, Pennsylvania, teens have created "General High School" for local cablecast. Teenagers write the scripts and star in the weekly half-hour soap opera.
- Shows *about* young people—Through a mixture of interviews, discussion groups, and dramatic skits, "The Vital Link" offers support to parents about child development issues, single parenting, and drug and alcohol use among teens. Originally seen on a local New Jersey cable system, "The Vital Link" is now cablecast in other parts of the country as well.

Commercial broadcasting for children—and network TV in particular—has become synonymous with the Saturday morning cartoon cavalcade, where a limited number of themes maintain a monopoly: superheroes, monsters, car chases, and video games have dominated in recent seasons. Children and teens have interests far broader, and community cable can address their curiosity. Moreover, it can do so with *human* participants, something rarely seen in today's children's TV lineup.

- News—Kimberly Maher, 14, is the chief correspondent, head writer, producer, and anchor of "Washington News . . . Kidstyle." The 25-minute monthly show began in the nation's capital; its popularity with young audiences led to its being cablecast in Chicago and Detroit, as well.
- Arts—Nashville's "Onstage" encourages youth involvement in and appreciation of theater by showcasing the productions of local nonprofessional and student actors.
- Sports—"Jock Rap," in Arlington, Massachusetts, brought together eighth-grade sports enthusiasts and local sports figures.
- Nature—Zoo animals, wildlife, and pets were the focus of "Animal Tracks," shown on Lafayette, Indiana, cable.
- History—Two children and their college-student guide explored turn-of-the-century Fullerton, California, on "Time Machine," a look at community life then and now.

"Profile," Newton, Massachusetts
Continental Cablevision of Massachusetts

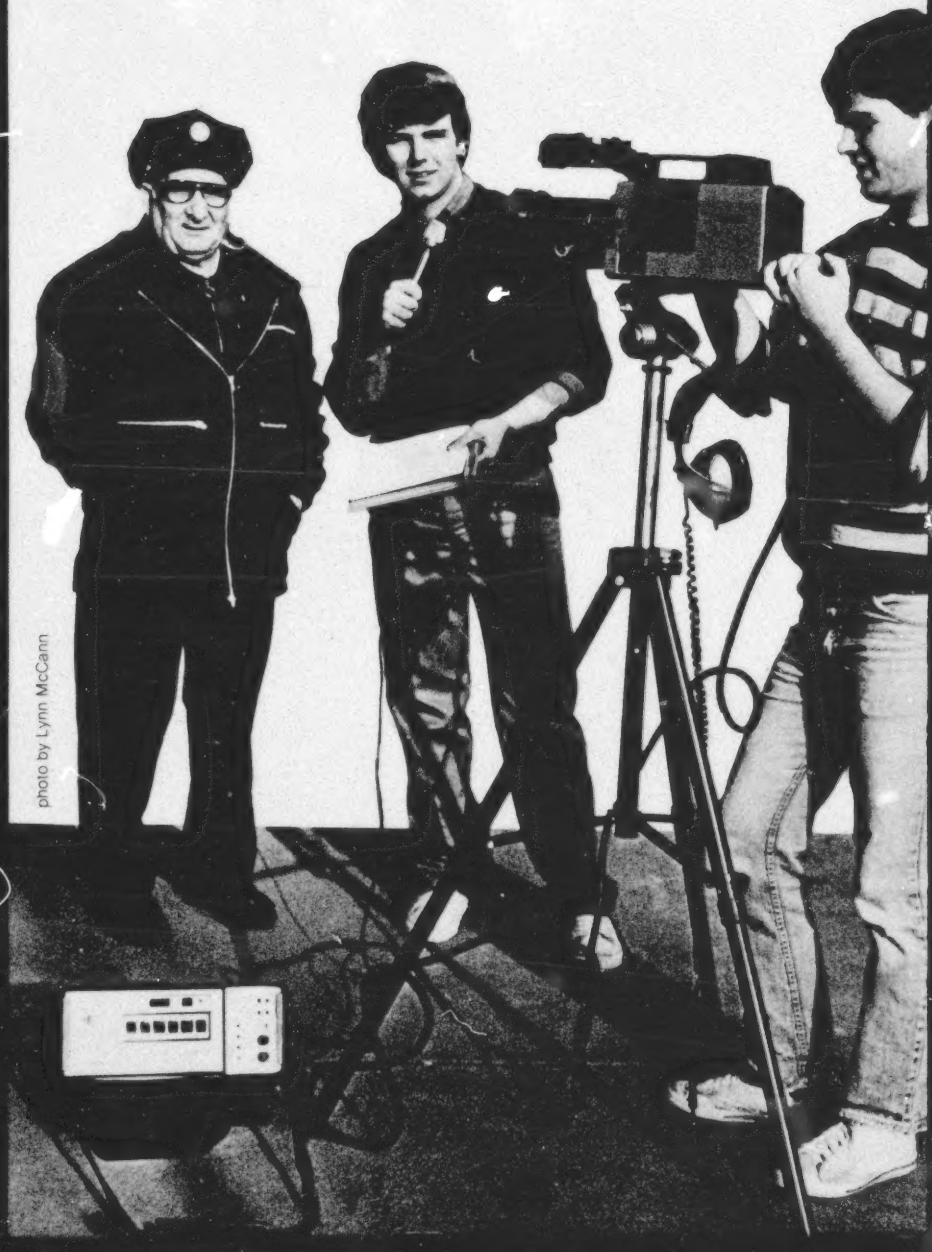


photo by Lynn McCann

Getting Involved

If you want to see something on TV, you had better come in here and put it on.
—Onscreen message, Channel 8, Longmeadow, Massachusetts

Anyone can get involved in community cable: young or old, rich or poor, groups, institutions, or individuals. And anyone can play just about whatever role he or she wishes in community cable: researcher, writer, editor, director, actor, even lighting, sound, or camera crew.

Many successful children's cable shows grow out of the efforts of adults interested in local programming for young audiences. Robert J. Clark, Jr., was dismayed when funds dried up for extracurricular media study at the school where he is an administrator. He invited a few students to his house twice a week; the response quickly necessitated renting space for a production workshop. Today, 150 boys and girls aged seven to 17 make up the nonprofit Cinekyd Enterprises in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania. Cinekyd participants produce radio shows, feature-length films and, for cable, the weekly "Cinekyd Television Theatre." Carried by a number of Pennsylvania cable systems, the program includes a Gothic mystery serial, a special effects segment and, for the younger set, a puppetmaker and his elves.

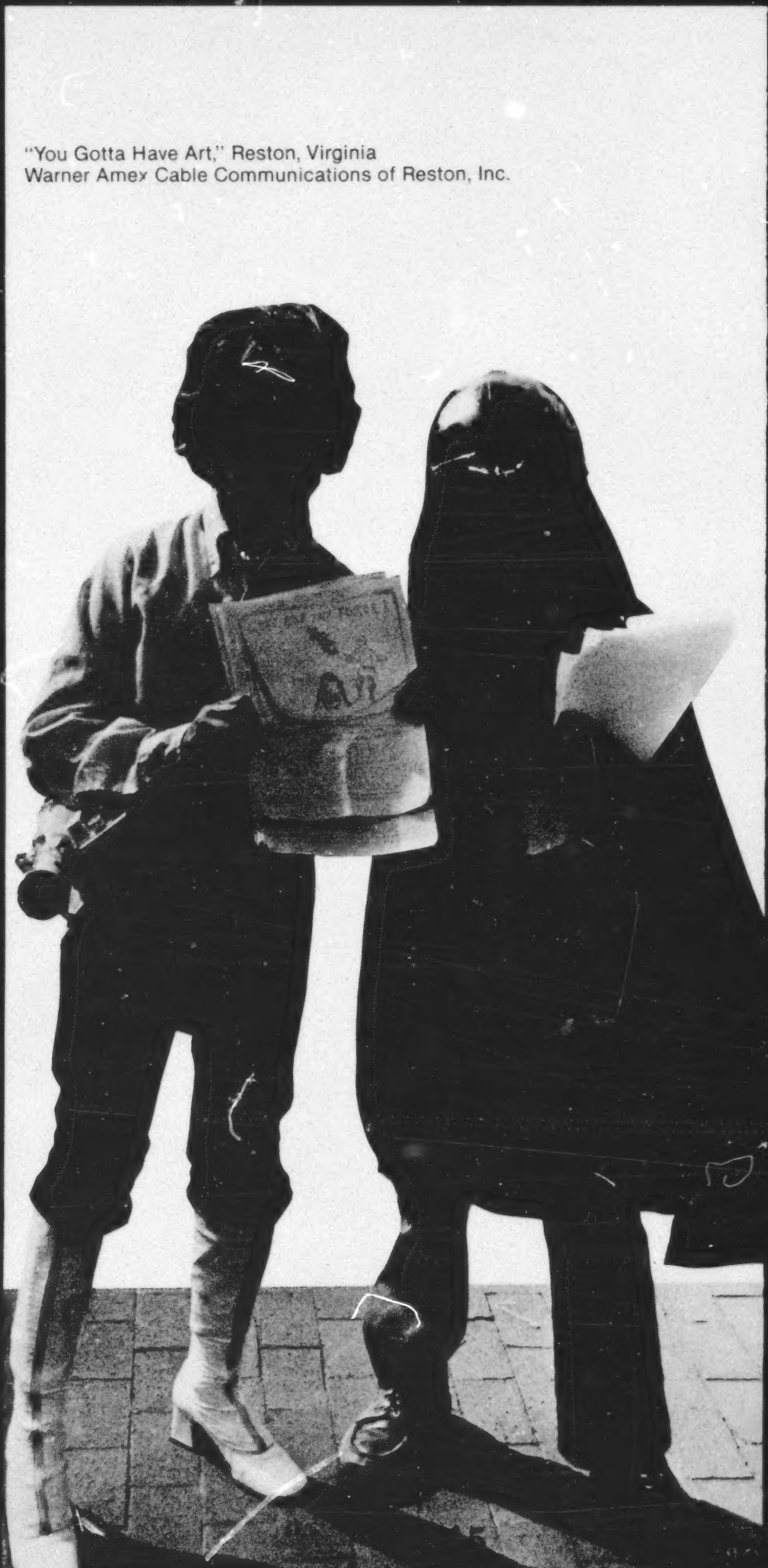
David Schifter became interested in public access at age 13. He first volunteered as a cameraman on an access show; a few months later he was producing and starring in his own program, "Spotlight on Teens," for the Manhattan cable system. David introduced his audience to a range of topics and personalities: the Heimlich Maneuver, an editor of *Mad* magazine, and a mime appearing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The uses of community video are as varied as your imagination.
—Nicholas Johnson, ex-commissioner, Federal Communications Commission

The first step for anyone interested in any aspect of making community cable TV is to find out what is offered by the local cable system. Is there a separate access facility, or is the cable studio open to the public? Are formal training sessions held, or do newcomers learn by apprenticeship? Does the cable system provide the videotape, or is that up to the access user? After getting an overview of how access works in your community, you might want to:

- Speak with others who have been involved in access productions.
- Volunteer to work on an already existing program for a better idea of what goes into cable production.
- Check the local library for any media-related materials, especially "how-to" guides.
- Enroll in a media workshop, run either by the cable system, the local access foundation, or other community groups (check schools, youth groups, religious organizations, video clubs, and so on).
- Think about what's missing from the community cable lineup that you might provide. What interests could you explore and share by making your own cable show?
- Write a detailed proposal and present it to the access coordinator or the head of local programming. Outline specific ideas and how you would present them. Describe the potential audience for your show.
- Round up a cast and crew. Friends, neighbors, and relatives can all play a part.

"You Gotta Have Art," Reston, Virginia
Warner Amex Cable Communications of Reston, Inc.



What's In It for Young People

When you think of communication as multidirectional, you see that watching TV is not really communicating. A kid can have a tremendous familiarity with prepackaged programming, but not know how to make his own. This is like knowing how to read and listen, but not how to write and speak.
—John LeBaron, director, Massachusetts Educational TV

For the young people who *watch* it, community cable can be a video civics lesson, teaching how the town works, how its government, schools, and social services operate. Community cable can familiarize young audiences with local history, personalities, job opportunities, and recreational facilities.

For the young people who *make* it, community cable can be an education not just in how a community functions but in how television functions. When children and teens understand how TV is made, the medium is demystified. That means better informed, more critical TV viewers—the kind of video literacy so necessary for everyone in our video age, but especially important to young TV consumers.

Some cable systems have begun to look at access programming as a valuable training ground for future employees. Nothing teaches job skills like hands-on experience, and access is nothing if not hands-on. But community cable is more than a springboard to a career in television. It's a way of working toward a goal with other children of all ages and cultures and of cooperating with adults in a setting less formalized and intimidating than the classroom.

Researching topics that are new to them, visiting unfamiliar locales for tapings, and interviewing people of different backgrounds all give young access users a chance to appreciate lifestyle and career alternatives. Seeing an access project through, from preliminary research through cablecast, gives access users new abilities and new confidence. And when neophyte TV "stars" watch themselves on videotape, they get a chance to see themselves as others see them. As a result, stuttering and slang often give way to clear speech; hair twisting and foot jiggling are controlled.

Our TV system could probably permit children to speak more often to other children without the foundation of the Republic crumbling.
—Michael J. Arlen, The View from Highway 1

Community cable can make the world at once smaller and larger. It can help communities get to know themselves and get to know, and understand, other communities:

- Children from the United States met Australian children across 100,000 miles of space via a 1981 TV interconnect. The nine- to 13-year-old Americans helped design, develop, produce, and engineer the one-hour interchange.
- Sixth grader Chris Garner is only one of many students in Irvine, California, who have taught other students through the city's interactive cable TV network, which allows for two-way communication. Chris tuned in to a program entitled "Paper Geometry," decided to put together his own geometry course, produced a syllabus and materials and, after an adult instructor gathered a class together, took to the screen to teach.

"Community Camera," Montgomery County, Pennsylvania
Colonial School District Instructional Television

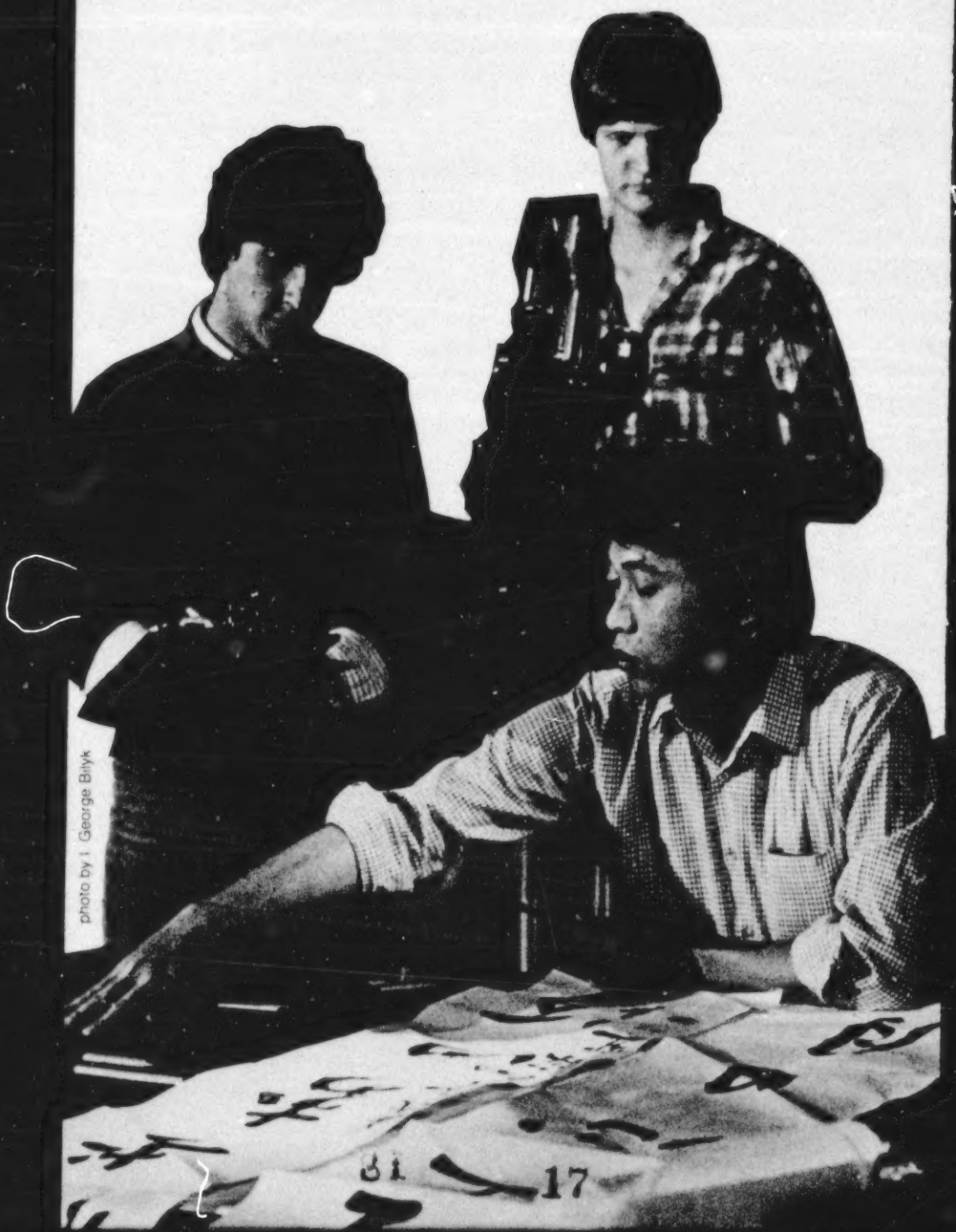


photo by I. George Bilyk

Serving Special Audiences

To really make this channel an alternative, we have to encourage alternative media, and alternative voices.
—Dr. Jabari Simama, director, Cable Atlanta Center for Community Television

With its emphasis on maximizing audiences to maximize profits, commercial television has never given an equal voice to all segments of society. But community cable, with its accent on citizen input rather than ratings and profits, could open the door to audiences that have long been underrepresented or stereotyped on the small screen:

- Newton, Massachusetts, cable TV featured retarded adolescents performing with other students in a high school production of *Annie*.
- North Carolina's Cherokee Cablevision uses TV equipment and facilities provided by the local high school and college to produce programming relevant to the interests of the Cherokee Indian reservation.

Getting diverse viewpoints into cable takes extra effort on the part of the cable company, however: in Atlanta, for instance, "special access workshops" are publicized in neighborhoods generally excluded from the TV picture. Community action is equally crucial: grassroots citizen response to cable in Dallas resulted in separate channels devoted to women, blacks, Hispanics, and special needs audiences.

For audiences that have traditionally been invisible on television, simply being seen onscreen is a giant step forward. Actually creating their own shows, and thereby controlling the image that is presented of who they are, is an unprecedented opportunity that special audiences have gladly seized:

- "American Youth Cable Theater" brings the talents of little-known black performers to New York City viewers.
- Ex-offenders and teenagers "on the skids" are motivated by San Francisco's "Young Ideas" interview series to master behind-the-scenes TV skills and eventually reintegrate themselves into the school system. The series grew out of a self-help program for deaf adolescents.

Beyond serving the needs of neglected members of the viewing audience, community cable narrowcasts offer benefits to the entire home audience by furthering understanding of people and issues rarely touched by mainstream TV. For young people participating in the production, there is the added benefit of face-to-face contact. Reading, Pennsylvania, youths and senior citizens exchange points of view by making "Bridging the Generation Gap"; Iowa City's "Let's Play to Grow" series brought nonhandicapped young producers together with a play-group for handicapped children.

Besides creating special programs for underserved audiences, community cable can improve on commercial broadcast TV by making people of color, women, the handicapped, and senior citizens more visible in *all* programming. And local cable shows can be made even more meaningful by regularly including signing or captioning for the deaf, or second-language captioning where appropriate.

"Kid Stuff," Syracuse, New York
Syracuse Cablesystems

What's In It for the Cable Company

Access can and must be more than just an obligatory public service gesture or a way of purchasing a kind of franchise insurance.
—Greg Vawter, educational access facilitator, Miami Valley (Ohio) Cable Television Council

Community cable programming is a sure way for cable operators to look good in the eyes of the public. For that reason, some cable systems have won franchises with pie-in-the-sky promises of local service that are forgotten once the ink dries on the contract. Protests, pressure, and (as a last resort) threats of revoking the franchise are the citizens' recourse when cable systems renege on their agreement.

Cable operators who view themselves as part of the community don't need to be coerced into serving children or other local audiences, however. They do so out of a belief that cable systems, like other local institutions, can thrive only by cooperating with individuals and groups around town. They know that equipment costs are dropping, making it more economical to maintain production facilities. And they understand that whatever it costs to set up, community cable for children pays off in the end . . . in more ways than one.

We look at it as a long-term investment—and I think it's a really good one.
—Huburtis Sarrazin, vice-president, Mickelson Media, Hastings, Minnesota

In a 1980 survey, 38 percent of all subscribers to the Bloomington, Indiana, system named local programming as their primary reason for signing up for cable. A commitment to local cable fare can be a valuable selling point for a cable company, both in terms of gaining subscribers and in terms of holding onto a franchise.

Cable operators can also parlay their local successes into more widespread triumphs, by offering popular community cable shows for and by young people to other cable systems and by entering programming competitions. Winning the National Cable Television Association's Award for Cablecasting Excellence or the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers' Hometown USA video competition can only enhance a cable system's reputation. And the better its track record, the better chance a cable system has of being awarded additional franchises.

Some cable operators may be attracted by the freedom to experiment that community programming allows. Community cable operators can pretty much make their own rules and try out alternative forms of programming and novel scheduling concepts, without worrying about the constraints of tradition that set the pace for broadcast TV:

- On Ohio's Miami Valley cable system, programming slots range from two minutes to five hours, and most shows are repeated at least five times.
- When the Boston public television station aired "Cannabis Rex," a theater production about marijuana performed by high school students, 14 cabled communities joined in an experiment in regional programming for teens and families. Follow-up programming produced by the local cable companies included in-studio panel discussions, live call-ins, and split-screen debates.

"Children's Video Theater," Amherst, Massachusetts University of Massachusetts School of Education and Amherst Public Schools

from John LeBaron, MAKING TELEVISION: A VIDEO PRODUCTION GUIDE FOR TEACHERS (New York: Teachers College Press, © 1981 by Teachers College, Columbia University)

Building Community Support

Public access is very much a two-way street. In order to make it work, it takes commitment on the public's part.
—Anne Janas, program development manager, Cox Cable Communications

When the Evanston, Illinois, public access studio opened its doors in 1983, there was already a waiting list of 250 people for training workshops. Not every community has such heightened awareness of cable's accessibility, however, nor can every community sustain such interest once cable loses the cachet of being the "new kid in town." Community cable can't happen on its own. It takes an enthusiastic community, and an equally enthusiastic cable system or independent access center, to make local programming the vital force it can be for young audiences.

Communities can begin to drum up interest in local cable programming long before homes are actually wired, to help ensure public participation once cable arrives. Although the town was not yet cabled, Marblehead, Massachusetts, schools instituted an independent study program teaching basic production skills at all grade levels. The project was such a success that high schoolers who had mastered the use and maintenance of sophisticated TV equipment saved the schools some $4,000 in repairs in 1981 alone.

Getting young people involved in cable should be a shared responsibility, with the cable system or independent access center working side by side with community leaders. Everyone can pitch in: educators can participate in setting up training workshops, and then let students know about them; local newspapers, TV and radio stations, libraries, and clubs can inform children and teens of opportunities for making cable programming; printers, stationers, and copy shops can donate materials for flyers and pamphlets, and merchants can set aside space for publicity.

Because access is an unorthodox medium, it may take unorthodox means to get the community involved, such as the speakers bureau set in motion to attract participants in "Children's Channel Television" in Palatine, Illinois. Reaching out to the disenfranchised may take added effort; few people think of television as a participatory medium, and those who are most often left out of the world of TV may need the most convincing that they can change that situation.

A cable system is part of a supermarket of programming. There are big shelves with broadcast offerings that almost hide every other product. . . . The cable company will give you a shelf, but there won't be any signs pointing to that shelf.
—Jayne Adair, executive producer, KDKA-TV, Pittsburgh

Getting young people involved in making cable is only half the battle; the other half is convincing subscribers to watch community cable channels. As more and more channels compete for an audience, the possibility of viewers accidentally discovering community cable shows is likely to decrease. Home audiences need to be told what young producers are doing and where to see it. Newspapers, program guides, notices on cable and broadcast TV and on radio, word of mouth, posters, T-shirts, even door-to-door handbills: no vehicle should be overlooked in getting the word out about innovative programming.

It may take a while for new shows to catch on, but given time and publicity, community cable can build an audience. "Kid Stuff" in Syracuse, New York, is the third most popular show on a local origination channel that claims 60 percent of the system's subscribers as regular viewers.

"45 Minutes from Broadway," Scottsdale, Arizona
United Cable Television of Scottsdale, Ltd.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

It's conceivable that in the next ten years a dozen large companies will own all the cable systems in the United States. These big companies are not going to be reflecting what we call minority views . . . . Clearly, we are pursuing a reckless national policy if we don't build safeguards into these media to ensure the First Amendment rights of every citizen.
—Les Brown, editor-in-chief, CHANNELS of Communications

An abundance of viewpoints is what community cable is all about, but the right to speak freely can mean speech that offends. Access sometimes leads to excess; raunchy home movies and nude talk shows can crop up when the public's right to self-expression is given free rein. There ought to be a way, therefore, for families to weed out shows they find unsuitable, without impinging on the rights of those who wish to tune in.

Detailed program guides can help parents and children plan their TV diet. Equally important, however, is for parents to be offered a means by which they can monitor television watching. All cable systems in California are required by law to make lock-out devices available to subscribers who want them; unfortunately, the law allows cable operators to charge for this feature. Working together, citizens can take the request for free parental cable lock boxes to the franchise table, the State House . . . even the federal government.

Many programmers really do believe that they know what's best for children; I think we should give the children a chance to tell us what they want.
—Red Burns, director, Alternate Media Center, New York University

Community cable will be just another missed opportunity if children aren't urged to determine what they would like to see on the TV screen—not only what their parents or teachers think they should see, but what's missing that cable could supply. The lines of communication have to remain open so young people can have their say . . . and learn how to say it effectively on camera.

Active, vocal young cable enthusiasts won't count for much, however, without solid financial backing for local cable efforts. With its relatively small audiences, community cable is obviously not the ideal vehicle for broadcast-style commercials. But local merchants can show their support for young people by underwriting programs and contributing props and organizational expertise in exchange for onscreen credit.

Financial commitment for community cable should be part of the franchise agreement, with the cable system, an independent access center, local government, foundations, or any combination of these taking responsibility for funding local productions:

- Boston's nonprofit access foundation is to be financed by five percent of the cable system's gross annual revenues.
- "Kids Alive!" and "Kids Stuff" in Bloomington, Indiana, are funded by the city, the cable system, the library, and foundation grants.

Community cable is a challenge to our nation of passive TV watchers: a challenge to translate our dissatisfaction with what television offers children (and the rest of us) into action. We can get involved: in franchise negotiations, in making our own programs, in helping our children produce their own. We can show that even on channels where just about anything goes, responsible viewing choice is preferable to censorship.

Community cable can work . . . if we make it work.

Community Cable: Everybody's Television

Community cable is a chance for citizens of all ages to help shape children's TV programming and expand viewing choices for young audiences. But it's up to all of us to pitch in and make it happen

It's up to parents, teachers, and community leaders to:

- Speak out at the cable franchise table for TV programming by and for local youth, and make sure that the terms of the agreement are met.
- Volunteer time and expertise wherever needed: setting up video training workshops in and out of school, serving on a cable citizen advisory board, helping to produce and publicize cable efforts for children and teens.
- Make sure that community cable reaches out to all neighborhoods, to senior citizens, to minorities, to women, to the handicapped, giving everyone a programming voice.
- Keep close ties with the cable company to suggest program ideas and to ensure coverage of community activities: school fairs, camp outings, children's theater groups, sports events.
- Encourage children and teens to become active TV audiences; urge them to talk back to the set by making their own television shows.

It's up to the cable company to:

- Make different forms of access programming and local origination part of the basic cable package, available at low cost to all.
- Maintain a commitment to community cable: to funding, producing, and publicizing local cable shows and to training young cable producers.
- Improvise, experiment, and let young people try out new concepts instead of sticking to hackneyed broadcast TV formats.
- Take advantage of cable's narrowcasting abilities: create different kinds of programs for specific ages, specific interests.
- Provide detailed program guides and free lock-out devices to help parents monitor their children's viewing.

It's up to local businesses and organizations to:

- Keep community cable for children commercial-free: underwrite programming for young audiences.
- Contribute video equipment, props, money, time, and expertise to help young cable enthusiasts get their projects onscreen.
- Organize and finance training workshops and scholarships that will benefit young people from all parts of the community.
- Help build an audience: donate printing supplies, poster space, novelty gimmicks bearing program logos . . . anything that gets the message out that children and teens have something to say that's well worth the public's attention.

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